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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the necessity of examining the needs of early adolescents and changing the focus of middle grades education in Australia, this report describes the findings from the Northcote Network of Schools, 8 primary and 2 secondary schools collaborating to develop continuity and coherence across grades 5 through 8. The paper outlines activities dealing with school organization, curriculum, and pedagogy, in the context of the unique needs of young adolescents and their implications for school organization and learning communities within schools. School organizational structures tried by the Northcote Network of Schools are noted, including team teaching, classes working with smaller numbers of students for longer periods of time, the use of home rooms, an integrative approach to curriculum, and appropriate learning strategies. The paper also describes how curricular concerns led to the implementation of health education programs, negotiation of curriculum content and structure, the use of individual contracts and thematic instruction based on students' questions, and the integration of pastoral care as part of the mainstream curriculum. Next, the paper details how pedagogical concerns have been addressed through cooperative group work, peer tutoring, constructivist approaches, contract-based work units, learning centers, computer technology, and student reflection. Noted barriers to change are a culture based on faculty identification with their subject area and a focus on faculty rather than student needs, and student or parent expectations of a traditional secondary level organization. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting that one key to effective change is to understand the different cultures in primary and secondary schooling and promote the development of a new culture in the middle years. (Contains 41 references.) (KDFB)

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The Northcote Network of Schools and the Middle Years of Schooling

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Traditionally it has been the senior secondary and the junior primary years that have most interested researchers, curriculum designers, administrators and educational planners. But since 1993 due attention has been focussed on the education of emerging adolescents in the upper primary and junior secondary years, the middle years of schooling. In that year, three influential reports were released that have had profound and far-reaching implications. The work of Peter Hill et al. in the Victorian Quality Schools Project demonstrated the plateauing (and in some cases decline) of students' achievement and enjoyment of schooling as they entered early adolescence and as they moved from the primary to the secondary sector. At the same time the national report of the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, *In the Middle: Schooling for Young Adolescents*, and the South Australian *Report of the Junior Secondary Review* argued that students in early adolescence form a distinct group with particular needs that are not sufficiently met by traditional upper primary and junior secondary structures and practices - and pointed to the need for reform at this level.

The fall in student outcomes in the middle years of schooling has been well documented. While Hill et al. have provided the strongest empirical evidence of the extent of the problem, there is a wealth of research that has been produced recently (Cumming 1994; Anderman & Maehr 1994) and in the past (Power with Cotterell 1981; Galton & Willcocks 1983; ILEA 1984) indicating a fall in motivation and engagement for our students in the middle years of schooling, and in some areas a fall or slowing of academic achievement. Most recently the report of the Student Alienation During the Middle Years of Schooling Project, *From Alienation to Engagement: Opportunities for Reform in the Middle Years of Schooling* (Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1996), has outlined the almost-hidden, passive disengagement from schooling of a large proportion of our students in upper primary and junior secondary school.

The need for change is being increasingly recognised throughout the Australian educational community[1]. Many groups of schools have started to address the problem. One of these groups is the Northcote Network of Schools[2]. The Northcote Network comprises eight primary schools and two secondary schools that have been working collaboratively since 1982. For the last few years the Network has been working on developing continuity and coherence

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[1] as more state and federal education systems review the education of young adolescents (Board of Teacher Registration, Queensland 1994; Northern Territory Education Advisory Council 1992), school clusters and individual schools revise their curriculum and practices (Australian curriculum Studies Association 1993; Cumming & Fleming 1993; Moore et al. 1993; Baker & Hamlett 1994; Harris 1994; Gates 1994; Terang and Noorat Education Cluster 1994), researchers begin to investigate the thoughts, experiences and needs of young adolescents (Barratt et al. 1992; Dwyer 1993; Hill et al. 1993; Cumming 1994; Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1996), educationalists design new curriculum and approaches to learning, and a wide variety of unions, curriculum associations and professional development bodies (such as the Australian Curriculum Studies Association, the National Schools Network, the Australian Education Union, Australian Teaching Council, the Victorian Board of Studies and the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English) turn their attention to issues of transition and middle schooling.

[2] The work of the Northcote Network of Schools has already been well documented (Graham & Maxwell 1994; Kruse 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996). Some of the information in this paper has, therefore, appeared elsewhere.

across years 5-8. It has also been researching middle schooling issues and trialing relevant reform both at individual school level and through a range of collaborative projects. This paper will outline some of the activities of the Northcote Network in addressing curriculum continuity and in beginning middle years reform in the three key areas of school organisation, curriculum and pedagogy, and will seek to outline the background and context that has underpinned our endeavours. It will also make some tentative comments on the change process and what we have learned through investigating and working at change.

Continuity and Coherence Across Years 5-8

In general, there are wide pedagogical gulfs between the primary and secondary sectors, dramatic differences in classroom management techniques and teacher-student relations, significant differences in the learning strategies that are valued in the two school settings, fundamental clashes in school organisation, and both significant gaps and major overlaps in the curriculum offerings between primary and secondary schools. These differences, and a lack of awareness of them, must impact on student progress at the years 5-8 level.

In the light of this, the Northcote Network of Schools Years 5-8 Curriculum Project was established with the following aims:

- to investigate and develop organisational structures that suit the learning and developmental needs of students in the middle years
- to establish a curriculum across the district that is coherent and continuous
- to develop appropriate teaching and learning strategies that meet the needs of students and of the society of which they are part
- to provide teachers at the years 5-8 level with an awareness of where their students come from or where they are going to
- to ensure a curriculum that provides, at primary level, skills, values and understandings necessary for success at secondary school, and that builds, at secondary level, on the successes that have come before
- to develop continuity of expectations from primary to secondary school
- to facilitate the sharing of useful and relevant information between partner schools
- to generate exciting and stimulating cross-sectional initiatives
- to establish pilot programs that investigate models of good practice for years 5-8
- to investigate and document those factors that drive and/or block appropriate change

The project began with a process of community consultation that included discussions with principals, teachers, parents and students at Northcote Network schools, representatives of local government, educational consultants, and others, and a process of investigation and information-gathering that included visiting local schools, examining relevant programs and structures at other schools, liaison with tertiary institutions, extensive reading, etc.

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One of our first major successes was a teacher visits program involving a series of full-day visits of teachers from primary schools to secondary colleges and from secondary colleges to primary schools. This series of visits involved well over eighty teachers across the Network in its first year and has continued on a smaller scale each year since. It has been resourced at the individual school level with some schools using curriculum days, some funding it out of their limited CRT budget, and the principals in others taking classes to release their teachers. The Network schools have, therefore, invested significant resources in the program and have been rewarded with some significant results, including: the sharing of ideas and strategies; changes and improvements to individual teachers' programs and pedagogy; heightened collegiality between participants; greater student comfort about the transition from primary to secondary school; a broad range of understandings about the differences and similarities between the two sectors; and a better understanding of students' backgrounds and needs.

From these visits and from our research a range of pedagogical issues have arisen. These have been addressed at several joint curriculum days focussing on years 5-8 curriculum continuity and coherence. Held in August each year, these 'conferences' have been attended by over 320 participants comprising all the teachers from the nine Network schools and representatives from many schools outside the Network. The conferences have resulted in the establishment of agreed Network-wide priorities and action planning. Some of the key pedagogical issues addressed have included: the inquiry approach to teaching and learning; developing students' independent learning skills; catering for mixed ability classes; hands-on and active learning strategies; matching teaching and learning styles; promoting student self-esteem; catering for students' individual needs; and the role of technology in early adolescent education. These remain some of the key issues for teachers at the years 5-8 level and will continue to be addressed at what has become an annual event.

Early in the project we established years 5-8 learning area subcommittees in English, mathematics and science to provide specific and detailed advice on curriculum development and methodology. These committees are made up of members of each of the Network schools, and have been working to isolate and redress any gaps or overlaps in the provision of a coherent and continuous curriculum across the Network. They have established a set of criteria for course development appropriate to students at the years 5-8 level, and have worked on the production of sample units of work based on those criteria. This structure is now in the process of being replaced by smaller and more 'product oriented' project teams.

Another success has been a teacher exchange program (Graham & Maxwell 1994) which has had primary and secondary teachers swapping classrooms for a small part of each week, planning curriculum units that have a joint primary and secondary perspective, and evaluating the organisational and structural factors that both drive and block appropriate methodology.

We have also initiated a range of collaborative projects including: the use of both secondary colleges' computer facilities on a timetabled and on-going basis by partner primary schools; the production of a resources matrix listing each school's equipment, facilities and staff expertise to facilitate greater sharing of resources; professional development to address common needs and interests across the Network; quality publication of Network-wide students' writing; sharing teacher time to enhance LOTE provision in the Network; and more flexible transition arrangements for individual students that have, in the past, seen some year 6 students incorporated into secondary classes for a day a week where appropriate.

It has, however, become clear to many working on the project that strengthening the connections between what already exists at upper primary level and at junior secondary school is only part of the issue. Also at issue is the nature of the young people in years 5-8 and the mismatch between their needs and interests and the traditional educational structures and practices at upper primary and junior secondary level.

Meeting Students' Needs in the Middle Years of Schooling

The students who are moving from primary to secondary school are certainly undergoing a transition - not just from one school system to another but also from childhood to adolescence. They have specific needs and attributes that too often are left out of educational discourse, and they are too often the inheritors of an educational structure that is historical rather than natural, that derives from a time when compulsory schooling stopped at the primary school gate, and when adolescence (when such a thing was recognised) began much later than it is generally believed to begin now. With our current situation, however, students in the final years of primary school and the first years of secondary school are caught in the middle of a system that is designed for the needs of students at either end of it, but which is not always appropriate for the needs of the young adolescents who make up years 5-8.

The ten to fifteen year olds that typically comprise years 5-8 are now generally considered to form a distinct developmental group (Cormack 1992, pp. 16-17). Although, as with all groups in society, there are huge variations within this group in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and levels of intellectual, physical, emotional and moral development, and the impact each of these factors has on an adolescent's experience, there is clearly a generalised early adolescent experience, a set of factors that need to be taken into account when developing appropriate educational structures and programs. Some understandings that must impinge on educational programming for students at this stage include:

- a group of students in early adolescence will be more diverse than at any time before or after; due to uneven development, a grouping of students at this level is likely to be

more heterogenous than early primary or late secondary students (Capelluti & Stokes 1991, p. 12; Eyers 1993, p. 8)

- students value security and a sense of safe limits at the same time as room for independence and experimentation (Cormack 1992, pp. 6-7; Hargreaves & Earl 1990, p. 25)
- there is a need for an approach that nurtures the wholeness of learning, that emphasises the links between aspects of students' learning, and that presents a meaningful and coherent picture (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989, pp. 47-8; Hargreaves & Earl 1990, pp. 129-30)
- there is a need for students to make sense of themselves and of personal issues, and at the same time to develop an understanding of the social and political world around them (Cormack 1992, pp. 5-9; Eyers 1993, p. 129)
- this is a time for the development of reflective thinking and the ability to think abstractly and creatively (Cormack 1992, pp. 14-16)
- students need to develop quality relationships with adult mentors who can provide advice and act as role models (Capelluti & Stokes 1991, p. 7; Eyers 1993, pp. 13-14, 59-60)
- Issues of self-esteem and self-concept need to be considered carefully in developing educational programs for early adolescents, as must students' need to safely navigate profound physical, emotional, social & intellectual changes (Beane & Lipka 1987, pp. 15-16; Eyers 1993, pp. 7-9).

One area of concern is school organisation and the size and structure of learning communities within schools. Many researchers and educators have argued the disadvantages of the traditional secondary structure where each teacher sees over a hundred and fifty students over the course of the week, many for only three forty-five minute sessions, with teachers and students rushing from one part of the school to another to get to their next class (Inner London Education Authority 1984; Hargreaves & Earl 1990). It is not possible, given this structure, for teachers to know their students well enough to build a personal relationship, or to know and therefore plan and cater for their individual learning needs; students to build significant relationships with adult mentors and role models in the school setting; teachers and students to develop a sense of security and ownership of their work surroundings; and schools to develop flexibility of programming. There are problems too with the traditional primary school structure with individual teachers taking their own class in their own room doing their own program. In this situation the students are also potentially denied access to quality relationships with adults should their one teacher not meet their specific needs, and the learning program will be shaped and limited by the nature of the one class teacher's knowledge and expertise (areas such as health, technology, or science are not always addressed by each individual teacher). Some writers are beginning to question whether in a generalist situation it is possible for the teacher to provide sufficient depth to satisfy the enquiring adolescent mind, to develop authentic assessment or to

understand when students have demonstrated divergent but nevertheless talented approaches (Taylor 1994).

The Northcote Network of Schools has also begun to examine and reframe school organisational structures that will better suit our young adolescents. Many students in Network schools have opportunities to develop purposeful and meaningful relationships with a number of teachers. In many of our primary schools teachers work in teams to plan collaboratively and to teach cooperatively. In at least one situation, two teachers team teach a group of fifty-four year 5/6 students, while in others, students change rooms and teachers for parts of the weekly program. In a similar vein, one of our two secondary schools runs a junior secondary program where each year 7 class has its own 'home room' and where teachers take two or more subjects with their year 7 classes, so that students have only six teachers, two of whom they see at least once a day and who, between the two of them, take the students for over fifty per cent of the week.

We are also currently running a junior secondary pilot project that incorporates some of the measures supported by our and others' findings on teaching students in years 5-8: classes working with a smaller number of teachers for longer periods of time; use of a home room for a large part of the week; a more integrative approach to curriculum delivery; timetabled team meetings to allow teachers to meet to discuss in detail the students under their care, consistency of approaches and curriculum cohesion; and the use of appropriate learning strategies including 'practical, context-rich approaches to learning . . ., physical activity, involvement with peers, discussion and reflection while learning, taking decisions (and the responsibility for them) . . ., and the use of technologies which have an obvious current or future place in [students'] lives beyond school' (Eyers 1993, p. 90).

A second area of concern is curriculum. Some of the key curriculum-based complaints of middle schooling researchers and students relate to fragmentation, a lack of perceived relevance or usefulness, and a lack of student voice in curriculum design (Hargreaves & Earl 1990; Eyers 1993; Cumming 1994). Others would add to these issues a concern about the overemphasis on content to the detriment of skill development, independent learning skills and respect for the affective domain.

Schools in the Northcote Network (or at least some teachers in some schools in the Network) have responded to this in a number of ways: implementation and/or strengthening of health education programs (especially in the light of discussions with our students); negotiation of curriculum content and structure; use of individual contracts to match curriculum to individual students' needs; and the development of pastoral care considerations as part of the mainstream curriculum rather than as an 'add on' component.

One approach to curriculum design that is gaining some currency in the Northcote Network is that pioneered by James Beane (1993). There has been quite some interest in this

approach since Beane was brought to Australia by the National Schools Network[3] in support of the middle schooling reform movement in Australia. In the negotiated, integrated model propounded by Beane and his supporters, students' questions about themselves and about the world around them form the basis of the curriculum content. Students determine themes which link their common personal and social questions, and make democratic decisions about which themes to investigate and in which order. Students also provide substantial input into the sorts of activities that will form the basis of the work done on the theme.

A third area of concern is pedagogy. Again previous research indicates the importance of peer relationships, the need for students to understand the processes happening in the classroom, the importance of independent learning skills, and the problems with teaching methods that assume homogeneity in the classroom (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989; Hargreaves & Earl 1990; Eyers 1993).

The responses to these sorts of issues are many and varied, and we - like many other schools or school communities - have used and are using strategies such as cooperative group work, peer tutoring, constructivist approaches to learning, contract-based work required units, and student reflection on the learning process and their own learning styles.

One approach that has successfully integrated a number of these aspects is the learning centre. It is working successfully at both primary and secondary level at schools in the Network. This approach utilises both Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Processes (Dalton & Smith 1986) and Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner 1983) as organising principles, and presents a wide variety of activities, of which students complete only a selection, chosen in negotiation with the teacher. This structure caters for the highly varied interests and levels of development of young adolescents, provides room for student choice and input, and fosters independent learning.

Another area of pedagogical change is in the use of computer technology, developments in which are rapidly sweeping through several of the Northcote Network schools. As schools provide computer access in classrooms, connect to the internet, develop local area Network (LAN) infrastructures, investigate the potential of interactive software and multimedia presentation, and plan for the establishment of whole classes of students with full time computer access through personal laptop computers, they are transforming the way learning takes place in the classroom. The students in many cases will be more familiar and practised with the technology and its capabilities so the role of teacher as expert and controller is no longer entirely appropriate. The classroom, therefore, becomes a more fluid learning community with the roles of the members of that community changing and interchanging at times. Similarly, the computer can be a most flexible tool, providing scope for students to pursue a myriad of different interests

[3]The National Schools Network is a school reform network linking together schools, teacher unions, and government and non-government employers. Member schools explore ways to improve teaching and learning by changing the organisation of schools and the work of teachers.

in the one classroom, and to a variety of levels of depth - almost mandating a more personalised approach to the teaching/learning process and a more holistic view of the curriculum.

Managing Change

Our research into middle schooling reform and our own pilot projects have provided a series of insights into the process of change in the middle years of schooling. From our experience it would appear that two of the main blockers to such change are 'culture' and 'expectations'.

Two different cultures exist in our schooling system, each with a set of icons that are so long-standing as to have become invisible and therefore mostly unquestioned. At the secondary level, faculty organisation and the importance of 'subjects' have led to what Andy Hargreaves (Hargreaves & Earl 1990) refers to as the 'balkanisation' of the education process. A teacher's training, employment, and position within the school are usually underpinned by their subject specialisation. Funding, rooming and curriculum decisions are often based on faculty needs and priorities. Reforms that focus instead on rooming based on developmental and pastoral needs, or on greater integration of curriculum at junior level, or even on teaching across subject boundaries are, therefore, a challenge to the organisational power structures that exist in many schools.

The timetable is another blocker often raised when teachers want to consider team teaching, home room programs, interdisciplinary team organisation or any of a dozen other 'middle schooling practices' - yet there are schools that have been able to rethink their education practices first and then have the timetable arranged to best support those practices. It is a matter of priorities. The timetable is not some edifice carved in stone. It is the embodiment of a set of school priorities - and can be 'reinvented' when the priorities of the school change.

At primary level, one of the major icons is the notion of 'my class' - a sense of ownership that makes it difficult for some teachers to perceive the benefit of their students spending time with others. Structures and practices that support the need for middle level students to develop quality relationships with a number of adults and the need for teachers to have sufficient subject knowledge and skills to stimulate and accommodate all students at this level often cut across the notion of 'one teacher-one class' and are sometimes opposed because of it.

Another cultural icon at primary level is the perception, held by some teachers, of years 5 and 6 students as children. This can lead to a curriculum and pedagogy more relevant to younger students than to the emerging adolescents that we find in the upper primary years. Teaching and learning strategies such as student participation, independent learning, and contract-based learning are developmentally appropriate for emerging adolescents, but may not be considered if we perceive our year 5/6 students as children (and therefore not ready for the responsibility and involvement that, in fact, upper primary students often crave). Our curriculum focus and

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organisational practices are also dictated by our perception of the developmental readiness of our students. If we do not recognise the place of upper primary students in a 'middle stage of learning', we take the risk of providing developmentally inappropriate and potentially alienating educational experiences for these young adolescents.

A second set of blockers relate to 'expectations' of primary and secondary schooling. Student or parent expectations can make change problematic, particularly at secondary level. In schools where students expect in year 7 to move from one classroom to another between periods, and to have a large range of teachers and 'new subjects', home rooms and a smaller group of teachers can be a disappointment. (On the other hand, in schools where such arrangements are an established part of the culture and students expect these arrangements, it is very successful.) Some parents see textbooks and class novels on a school booklist as a symbol of 'seriousness about school work and achievement'. To drop class novels in support of a more individualised literature program is difficult in such a community. Indeed, a great deal of community liaison is necessary before schools can successfully implement a range of educational innovations (e.g. negotiated curriculum, goal-based assessment, student portfolios).[9]

One key, then, to effective change in the middle years of schooling is to gain an understanding of the different cultures that surround, embody and infuse primary schooling and secondary schooling, and to promote a series of endeavours that lead to the development of a new culture in the middle years of schooling. Thus we need to come to an understanding of the needs of young adolescents and to use this understanding to transcend the 'what is' to get to the 'what should be'.

Change, even a small change, is thus an achievement. There has now been in Australia significant research and writing on issues relating to the middle years of schooling. Many schools are starting to address those issues. Although, compared with the international context, the discussion is still in its early stages in Australia, there is general agreement among those taking part in it that there is a need for a critical review of educational structures, pedagogical practices, and curriculum offerings at the middle schooling level. As we all strive for our locally appropriate solutions, it is instructive to take note of the successes and failures of those schools and clusters who have been working in the area, and of which the Northcote Network of Schools is but one. Many will go further than some of these early pioneers, but it is useful to note the endeavours of those that have laid the foundations of the profound changes that are to come in the middle years of schooling.

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